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Detective, Historian, Reader: Alternate History and Alternative Fact in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*

Abstract: Alternate history is on one level liberated from the narrative of history and verifiable fact, but it is also mercilessly reliant upon that narrative for its effectiveness. This paper analyses how William Gibson's *The Peripheral* subverts familiar elements of the alternate history genre, combining it with similarly distorted conventions from detective fiction, manipulating the reader's response, and causing them to question accepted truths, realities and roles, problematizing narratives of history and justice.

Keywords: alternate history, alternate future, detective fiction, crime fiction, reading

The alternate history novel and the detective novel are frequent companions. Indeed in her recent work on the counterfactual imagination Catherine Gallagher describes them as "a natural coupling" (283). Plots from detective fiction, and its near-cousin crime fiction, have been commonplace in alternate history since at least the 1970s, when Len Deighton created his Detective Superintendent Douglas Archer of the London Metropolitan Police, working homicide cases in a Britain occupied by Nazi Germany in *SS-GB* (1978). In this article I propose that one reason for the success of this combination of narrative and location (the estranged alternate-other) is the manner in which they engage readers, inviting similar behaviors. Furthermore, I shall examine this connection of kindred genres in William Gibson's *The Peripheral* (2014), a novel which demonstrates the self-same hybridity whilst simultaneously complicating and manipulating it.

The Peripheral is a science fiction novel set in two dystopian futures where the outlook is particularly bleak. Of course, Gibson himself has said that many of the works which we might consider dystopian, including his own, are only dystopian from our perspective: "to middle-class white people in North America. They don't seem dystopian if you live in Rio or anywhere in Africa. Most people in Africa would happily immigrate to the Sprawl" (Newitz, "William Gibson Talks to io9"). Yet in evoking the setting of his most famous novel *Neuromancer*, published thirty years before *The Peripheral*, in 1984, he also reminds us that despite its "middle-class white" dystopia, many of the characters seem to enjoy themselves and be having fun doing what they do and expressing themselves. In *The Peripheral*, particularly in the more

distant of its two futures, Gibson has created a dystopia which seems to be universally applicable to all except a very small-but-powerful minority. However, the focus of this essay is not on the dystopian aspects of the novel, but rather on two other genres which it taps alongside this more instantly recognizable form of science fiction: the crime novel and the alternate history.

From the beginning it is important to remain conscious of Gibson's own genre-savvy writing. He initially resisted the label "cyberpunk" because he recognized the power of genre to define limits, in this case to how an author might be perceived. Thus, Gibson employs crime and alternate history tropes and conventions in order to willfully subvert them, throwing out as many standards as he retains and playing none of them straight. In a 2007 interview he provides a particularly insightful analogy to his use of genre which we can see demonstrated as readily in his latest novel as anywhere else:

> Genre structures for me are like armatures in sculpture. They're like coat hangers thrust through modelling clay. They give me something to hang the whole thing on but in themselves they're just coat hangers. I know they're just coat hangers, although in some cases they're coat hangers that I'm culturally fond of.
>
> My ideal reader feels the same way about genre structure that I do, and they don't take them totally seriously. I'd much rather read a novel that plays with genre conventions than a genre novel that obeys, however excellently, every convention. (Dueben 175)

Whilst the blending of crime fiction and alternate history fiction has in itself a certain playfulness with regards to genre convention, it is not this alone which makes *The Peripheral* worthy of note. As already noted, the alternate history novel and the crime novel, particularly the detective novel, are actually a well-established pairing. Both genres engage the reader in an active role of cognitive engagement beyond the passive act of reading. A conventionally successful detective novel lays the breadcrumbs for the reader to solve the crime alongside the detective, a concept of "fair play" which has been a guiding rule for detective fiction since being codified by author Roland Knox in 1929, "grounded in the notion that the reader should, at least in theory, be able to solve the crime at the heart of a story of detection, and for this reason would have access to the same information as the fictional detective" (Scaggs 27). Adhering to the rule of fair play formed part of the oath members took when signing up to the Detection Club, a group of authors whose members have included almost every significant British crime writer, for instance G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John le Carré, Ngaio Marsh, Colin Dexter, Ian Rankin, and many others.

Part of the appeal of good detective fiction is the structure it imparts upon the world, in a world where it can be difficult to extract oneself from the moment sufficiently to appreciate anything resembling a chain of causality, detective fiction

imparts some sort of order. Similarly, good alternate history has an explanation, a chain of events which link together in a way the reader can follow and appreciate. Successful alternate history subsumes the reader's sense of disbelief by appealing to the feasibility of its suggested alternate chronology. This is especially true in the case of what Karen Hellekson calls "the true alternate history": narratives set some significant time after the point of departure, what she calls the nexus point, where our timeline and the timeline of the alternate history separate from each other (Hellekson 5). In short, the detective novel engages the reader as detective, whilst the alternate history encourages the reader to act as historian, using information provided by the author, and sometimes quite subtle references, to piece together the timeline of this new world from the nexus point to the present day of the novel.

Highly successful examples of this blending of alternate history and the detective novel include Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), which draws particularly on the hard-boiled crime genre, Jo Walton's *Small Change* trilogy (2006-2008), of which the first novel, *Farthing* (2006), recasts the Agatha Christie-esque cosy-crime in an alternate history setting, and Lavie Tidhar's *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014), which again takes influences from hard-boiled fiction, as well as Israeli *shund* pulps. That each of these examples is an alternate history which centers on the Second World War is a symptom of my own research interests, but it is also a reflection of the enduring popularity of the Second World War as a venue for alternate history fiction (the most popular playground for an alternate history, except in the United States where it is held to second place by the Civil War). The necessity for Second World War alternate histories to be modern in setting makes them still more attractive for potential detective plots, given that genre's own affinity for modernity, Victorian predecessors and the growing subgenre of historical crime aside.

Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, for instance, focuses on Meyer Landsman, a detective in the vein of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett. The novel retains the West Coast hard-boiled aesthetic except that rather than Philip Marlowe's LA, or Sam Spade's San Francisco, Landsman is a detective in Sitka, Alaska, which was given over to Jewish refugees fleeing Europe in the 1940s on a fixed-term lease, a genuine proposal which was recommended in the U.S. Congress but ultimately abandoned. Confronted with this strange city, a mashup of the hard-boiled, Yiddish tradition, and cross-cultural tension and mingling with the local Native American (Tlingit) population, the detective mystery is the familiar lifeline the reader clings to as they assemble this timeline's alternate chronology through its references to the nuclear bombing of Berlin, an Israeli state that did not survive past 1948, a Cuban War, JFK marrying Marilyn Monroe, and more.

It is precisely because alternate history requires the reader's engagement to achieve its full effect that the majority of the narratives cluster around well-known pieces of popular history rather than relatively obscure events and periods. If the reader cannot spot what is different about a 12th-century Italian merchant family

in a world in which an earthquake caused Venice to slide beneath the waves, then the cognitive effect on the reader is no different between the alternate history and a conventionally realist historical novel. Similarly, for alternate history to achieve its full effect it requires an implicit pact between the reader and the author, a suspension of disbelief but also a simultaneous recognition of fictionality. It is this author-reader relationship which sets deliberate alternate history aside from the mistakes in poorly-researched historical fiction, from secret history conspiracy thrillers, or from propaganda and willfully misleading readings of history.

Gibson's *The Peripheral* turns this whole relationship upside down. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, we are not dealing with history, but with the future. Indeed, a more appropriate term might be alternate futures: there are two timelines in *The Peripheral*, both in our future, yet as the novel progresses the interactions between the two timelines cause divergences in the fictional history creating an alternate past. The first timeline is our near-future of 2023; the other is more distant, with an imprecise date which is deliberately sidestepped and elided over in the novel, but referred to as "some seventy years" later, i.e. sometime in the 2090s. This more distant future exists after a global catastrophe, referred to as "the jackpot," and whilst the precise date of its setting is unclear, these sections of the novel are clearly geographically defined, with the action taking place largely in London, in areas and streets which will be familiar, such as Farringdon, Mayfair, Soho, Embankment, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, and so forth. The 2023 setting is the opposite, defined in a relatively precise way timewise, but with a deliberately imprecise geography. It is set in the small city of Clanton in the United States, but where exactly that might be is never clear. The only place it cannot be is Virginia because there is a reference to sending a character to North Virginia (apparently a Virginian would refer to North Virginia as "upstate" and thus the choice of phrase rules out Virginia as a location). In an interview with Annalee Newitz ("William Gibson On the Apocalypse") the writer remarks that he thinks it is "a failing of the text that it feels as southeastern as it does. [He] was hoping that people would identify with it more widely."

Gibson is intentionally sparing with his use of explanation in *The Peripheral*, a "fractal exposition" which can require persistence on the part of the reader (Sturgeon "Nostalgia for the Future"). Combined with being unable to map the two settings in both time and geography is part of what contributes to the "cognitive dissonance" of the novel, which makes the first hundred-or-so pages of the book particularly challenging reading. Cognitive dissonance, a term developed by social psychologist Leon Festiner, refers to the human tendency to rationalize the inconsistencies that can arise between actions and beliefs as well as the resulting "psychological tension having motivational characteristics" resulting in the change of either the belief, the action, or the perception of the action in order to relieve that tension or dissonance (Brehm and Cohen 3). The term is one of Gibson's preferred ways to talk about the affect his fiction has on readers; even in discussing the title of *Neuromancer* (let alone any of the content) he refers to "a kind of booby-trapped portmanteau that

contained considerable potential for cognitive dissonance, that pleasurable buzz of feeling slightly unsettled." Gibson goes on to state that he believes this state "could be induced at a number of levels in a text—at the microlevel with neologisms and portmanteaus, or using a familiar word in completely unfamiliar ways" (Wallace-Wells 214). For scholars of science fiction, Gibson's use of the term cognitive dissonance might best be understood in relation to Darko Suvin's description of science fiction as a "literature of cognitive estrangement" (15): somewhere between cognitive hyper-estrangement and hyper-cognitive estrangement. Thus, in *The Peripheral*, the reader is left to flail for something to latch onto in their reading experience and amongst the more accessible concepts, especially for those versed in the megatext of science fiction, is the alternate history and time travel genre.

The near-future setting is home to Flynne Fisher and her brother Burton and is accessed by the far-future London, home to Wilf Netherton and his friends/employers/colleagues Lev, Ossian, and Ash, through quantum tunneling. This technique allows Wilf and his compatriots to exchange data with the past through a hidden server, but not to travel physically to it or to receive physical visitors. As soon as the connection was established, the two timelines are locked in step with each other, an hour passes in one and it passes in the other, but they also exist independently of each other: changes in the past do not affect the future. Gibson's decision to leave an explanation of this relationship between the two timelines until almost a quarter of the way through the novel demonstrates the extent to which he is willing to prolong his readers' states of cognitive dissonance:

> 'You use it to communicate with the past, or rather a past, since in our actual past, you didn't. That rather hurts my head, Mr. Zubov. I gather it doesn't hurt yours?'
>
> 'Far less than the sort of paradox we're accustomed to culturally, in discussing imaginary transtemporal affairs,' said Lev. 'It's actually quite simple. The act of connection produces a fork in causality, the new branch causally unique. A stub, as we call them.'
>
> 'But why do you?' she asked, as Ossian poured her tea. 'Call them that. It sounds short. Nasty. Brutish. Wouldn't one expect the fork's new branch to continue to grow?'
>
> 'We do,'' said Lev, 'assume exactly that. Actually I'm not sure why enthusiasts settled on that expression.'
>
> 'Imperialism,' said Ash. 'We're third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier.' (103)

A number of alternate history novels feature a relationship between a primary timeline and an alternate one. In *The Peripheral* this relationship becomes transactional, something Gibson concedes he adapted from the Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner short story "Mozart in Mirrorshades" (1985). Wilf's timeline, in which the majority of humans died in—or as a result of—the jackpot, is dominated by a self—governing elite who have consolidated global wealth and power; so naked

is this system that they openly refer to it as "the klept." The klept represent the ultimate extension of the ever-growing inequality of global capitalism, one that has reached such levels that the poor and middle class seem to have literally died off and left the elite to inherit the world. Having reached an advanced technological state, there is no hint of innovation or further progress in Wilf's present, rather the characters spend all their time discussing the past (both Flynne's, and older times recreated in themepark-like Cosplay Zones), visiting bars, partying, or engaging in other entertainments. Indeed, what would seem to us to be a major, globe-changing innovation—the direct accessing of the past and the creation of alternate timelines—is actually nothing more than a rich man's folly. These stub timelines are created by rich enthusiasts as complex psychodramas, R&D divisions for weapons labs, and general entertainment. Ironically, in this context the stub timelines become the literal "parlour game with the might-have-beens of history," alternate histories that historian Edward Hallett Carr famously dismissed as being "the 'might-have-been' school of thought—or rather of emotion" (97, 96).

Flynne and Wilf are able to electronically project their consciousness into each other's timelines by remotely controlling artificial bodies: she in an advanced human-like body, the titular Peripheral, and he in a more primitive device called a "wheelie boy" (essentially an iPad on wheels). Through these interactions, and others, such as emails, phone calls, and stock purchases, the two timelines exert pressure and influence upon each other. The precise nature of these communications, and the influence of the distant timeline upon the near one, are only part of what makes this novel difficult to summarize in any meaningful manner. That this is deliberate by Gibson is revealed by his choice of epigraph for the novel: "I have already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling." Almost as significant as this quote from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* are the lines which Gibson omits. Taken from the scene in which the Time Traveller frantically escapes, Well's novel continues: "and this time I was not seated properly in the saddle, but sideways in an unstable fashion" (97). The notion of the time traveller travelling through time sideways speaks to alternate history, the instability and confusion to cognitive dissonance. In a novel which wants to make the reader work for their cognitive engagement, Gibson is surely conscious of the lines which he leaves unquoted in his epigraph.

Flynne's first contact with the future is when she pilots a drone to keep paparazzi robots away from a residential tower's occupants. During one of her sessions she witnesses a brutal murder and is subsequently traumatized by the experience: she had previously thought she was performing a task to help test a new high-end virtual reality game, but the vivid strangeness of the murder (the woman's body is literally deconstructed on a molecular level by swarming nanobots as she falls from the tower) is her first real hint that this might not be the case. It is another instance of mirroring of the timelines that Flynne mistakenly believed the future world was a game when it is in fact real, whilst the rich playboys of the future treat their private

stub timelines, which are in every respect real (albeit in another reality), as games for their enjoyment.

The murder in Wilf's London is investigated by Detective Inspector Ainsley Lowbeer, but she is in the unusual position of having her only witness living in a different timeline. One might think that at least this might be the ultimate witness protection program for Flynne, except that through means that even the other characters cannot work out, someone has hacked into the stub and is funding hit squads and shadow government organizations to eliminate Flynne and her brother before she can identify the killer. As such the crime narrative in *The Peripheral* takes on a struggle to keep Flynne and her friends and family safe, rather than a chain of deduction and reasoning, yet we catch glimpses of Lowbeer's process as she works out the case and moves pieces into place both subtly and outside of the novel's narrated time. Lowbeer represents the all-knowing detective, in the mold of Holmes, Poirot, and Columbo, an intimidating presence to Wilf and his friends; she has genetic and technological upgrades that keep her active and capable despite being over ninety years old and a survivor of the jackpot herself.

Writing on the interaction between crime fiction and cultural memory in Catalonia, Stewart King remarks that the genre draws attention to a palimpsestic past through its emphasis on recovery of evidence and memory, that "the crime genre's unique narrative structure replicates the writing and rewriting of the past" (819). Gibson emphasizes the rewriting element of this structure through his interaction with the possible future and its creation of an alternate past. Through her use of a witness in the past, and her employment of various agents in that past to secure that witness's safety, not least a past-version of herself, Lowbeer actively rewrites the past in order to secure justice in her present, contributing to the creation of an alternate history. The effect of this twisting of the alternate history and crime or detective story is that Gibson creates an environment which feels just familiar enough to evoke a reader response, but strange enough that it still feels innovative, and unsettling: a narratological uncanny valley. Just as with conventional alternate histories and detective novels, the reader is invited to actively participate in the novel, to attempt to discern new narrative information from the text, something enhanced by the extreme cognitive displacement effect, doing so causes the reader to pay particular attention to Flynne's timeline as the far-future timeline is significantly more estranged and an environment which is both full of awful and full of awe.

Flynne's timeline is going through various problems: global warming is taking a toll, as is antibiotic resistance, but the most prominent element of the dystopia is the domination of a small number of corporations and the general poverty, or at least daily struggle, of the normal characters. Whilst the problems are not as severe in this regard as the fully realized klept of the more distant timeline, their connection is emphasized by Flynne's attempts to avert or at least soften the jackpot which she worries have only resulted in creating a new klept in her own timeline. From these two points, some seventy years distant, it does not take much extrapolation to trace

the line five years back (ten to the original publication date) to find our own society waiting to develop into Flynne's and, in turn, into Wilf and Lowbeer's. The dominant corporation in her America is Hefty Mart, who are not only the majority employer, but also the sole provider of everything from groceries to military-grade police surplus, with brands such as Hefty Water, Hefty Inn, 3D printing firm Hefty Fab, and more. So pervasive is the dominance that Flynne's friend Shaylene takes pride in the fact she has been able to feed herself through "a business that wasn't Hefty, wasn't building drugs, and was at least partly unfunny [meaning corrupt]," and it is clear that this is an actual achievement (270). Much later in the novel, as contact with the alternate future allows Flynne and her brother to manipulate stocks and shares in their own timeline, their company buys a controlling share in Hefty and Flynne is astonished: "'How can you buy Hefty?' It was like buying the moon" (472).

Gibson's kleptocracy is clearly a more evolved form of the advance of our contemporary capitalism, the ever-widening inequalities that exist between the vast majority and the 1%, or even the 0.1%. It's notable, for example, that the post-disaster future is in London, a city very much in danger of losing itself to such forces; that the evocative towers which Gibson describes are based on the architectural monstrosity that is The Shard; and that the owner of the stub timeline, Wilf's employer, is the son of one of the most powerful men in the klept, who happens to be a Russian émigré. In terms of consequences, even the name of the apocalyptic scenario in *The Peripheral* reeks of capitalism: "the jackpot." The positive connotations—of winning something—suggest it was named by the klept survivors who did very well out of the disaster, their jackpot winnings: final control of the earth. But it also evokes gambling, cashing out, finance and money, suggesting the role of "subservience to the market."

If Gibson's intent in using his cognitive dissonance to draw our attention is indeed to allow us to see the course our society has plotted, then *The Peripheral* is an even more depressing book. Nothing in either of these future timelines suggests an escape for the endpoint, just a variation on it. By the novel's end Flynne and her friends and family have survived their various perils and the murder mystery has been solved so they begin to use their connection to an alternate future to avert the jackpot in their own time, they find happy endings for themselves on a personal level, but they are unable to do so without manipulating those same gears and levers of capitalism. The suggestion at the novel's end is that they cannot prevent the jackpot but perhaps might be able to ameliorate it somewhat: a lesser jackpot with fewer deaths.

Flynne and her friends drawing technology and finance from the future leads to the idea, proposed by Anna McFarlane, that the novel is Gibson "asking what we need from the future and how science fiction can serve this need" (116). He is unable to provide us with a solution, but he does draw our attention to the question. Alternate history is normally used to suggest plasticity, that chronology is not fixed and paths can be changed, and while Gibson nods to this he is also suggesting an inertia which may be moving us along a given path at such a pace that we are unable

to avoid ending up somewhere similar. To perhaps put it in geographic terms: imagine making a slight course correction to your flight from London to the U.S. and ending up in Orlando instead of New York. The place seems very different but you are still in the United States and Donald Trump is still the president.

The reference to President Trump is not entirely flippant. In fact, Trump's influence may already have caused a divergence in timelines in Gibson's own career. In interviews for the promotion of *The Peripheral* with various media sources, Gibson refers to the novel as a standalone, a rarity in his canon. However, the events in our present have altered that future, and a passing line in *The Peripheral* to the state of U.S. politics in Flynne's time now has a totally different significance than it did in 2014:

> [Wilf, talking about his own timeline]: '… Reality television. It merged with politics. Then with performance art.'
>
> They walked on. 'I think that already happened, back home,' she said. (347)

The inescapable peril of writing set in the near-future is on full display here. Flynne's setting is 2023, but she makes no reference to the star of a reality television series becoming the President of the United States. Flynne's President is not only a woman, but a Latin-American, something that feels a world away from the politics of Trump. Despite frequent references to himself over the years as being an apolitical author, Gibson is now writing a sequel to *The Peripheral* which engages with this alternate future he has created, *The Agency*, due in late 2018. Whilst plot details are thin at this stage, it has been confirmed that it will return to Wilf's London and include other stub timelines, including one in which Hillary Clinton won the Presidency (Kean).

In an age of post-truth, post-expert, and alternative facts, alternate history has a peculiar role to play. When supporters of Trump and Brexit will read unverified, unsourced memes as facts online and allow it to shape their worldview (and for the sake of balance: yes, this happens right across the political spectrum), alternate history fiction invites us to question the reality we think we recognize. It simultaneously asserts a linearity to history (changing event A leads to altered event B, to event C, and so forth), whilst suggesting a branching of possibilities. There is inherent conservatism in the manner in which those branching possibilities are still reflections of our own history, featuring the same big names and events, even if modified, which provide handholds for readers. Gibson's brand of cognitive dissonance erodes those handholds, creating a much more difficult but ultimately rewarding experience. Such reading requires critical thought, engagement, and analysis; applied elsewhere it leads us to investigate sources and consider the validity of material. Now more than ever, in the information-saturated age in which we live, it seems this sort of reading is important and, perhaps, we all need to be detectives and historians as well as readers.

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